

‘Mind what gap?’: An Interview with Hilary Mantel

Hilary Mantel is a contemporary British writer who has published eleven novels, one memoir and two collections of short stories. A relatively unknown and under-researched author, she shot to fame in 2009 by winning the Booker Prize for her historical novel *Wolf Hall* – an intelligently sensitive account of Thomas Cromwell’s spectacular rise from blacksmith’s son to right-hand-man of Henry VIII.

I interviewed Mantel at her Devon home in September 2012, just one month prior to her making literary history by winning the Booker Prize for a second time for her follow-up to *Wolf Hall*. This staggering achievement made her the first woman to win the prize twice, the first British author to gain a double, with *Bring Up the Bodies* becoming the first sequel to ever receive the award. She remarked on accepting the prize: ‘Well I don’t know, you wait twenty years for a Booker Prize... Two come along at once!’ A characteristically humorous and self-deprecating response that she qualified by saying she had no expectations of standing at the podium for a third time when the final instalment of her Tudor trilogy, *The Mirror and the Light*, is published.

We pursued an engaging, vivid and wide-ranging conversation in the sitting room of her top floor flat, which overlooks the bay. Mantel and I discussed her roots in the Derbyshire village of Hadfield where I also grew up and where there is now a blue plaque marking her childhood home. In particular, we considered the figure of the ellipsis, since the ambiguities inherent to elliptical thinking seem so to suit the uncertain bases of her writing, as I hope this interview helps to illustrate.

Bring Up the Bodies was of course long-listed for the Booker 2012 at the time of the interview, but the text that traces our discussion more implicitly is her Hemmingway-style short story of six words: ‘Mind what gap?’ All my questions were a mixture of part research/part curiosity, although the two are of course difficult to separate; these are set down first here for clarity.

1. You have talked widely about your late (and sudden) success as partially resulting from a difficulty of categorisation. Do you think that this could be to do with the absence of stabilised ‘origins’ within your texts that would support the popular notion of such categories – i.e. the thriller as a secret *explained*, the historical novel as ‘the truth’, the autobiography as linear?

2. What are your thoughts on what might be termed ‘motifs’ in your work, such as characters searching their own reflection for meaning, slammed doors and footsteps heard overhead or in the night? What significance do you think these ‘lightly drawn’ *traces* have in your writing?
3. The film *Ghost Dance* (1989) is a great favourite of mine; in it, the philosopher Derrida is asked by a postgraduate student whether he *believes* in ghosts. Do you believe in ghosts?
4. Where do you think ‘the author’ is in their text?
5. What do you consider is the relationship between humour and writing in your work?
6. Most of your characters are openly flawed; I celebrate their imperfection and imperfection generally, do you? If so, why?
7. I delivered a paper comparing *Every Day is Mother’s Day* with Nicola Barker’s novel *Darkmans* (2007) because both texts suggest that ghosts can father children. Have you read any of Barker’s books? If so, which ones and what did you think?
8. Who are your preferred contemporary writers?
9. You use the dot, dot, dot of the ellipsis frequently in your work. What draws you to it?
10. What does the notion of ‘the gift’ mean to you, and your writing?
11. What is the relationship between a book and its sequel? Or a sequel and its ‘book’? Especially in terms of the sequels within your corpus.
12. Of all your books, you have said that *A Change of Climate* was the hardest to write – does that make it different? Does it stand out? And which is your ‘favourite’ of your books?

Hilary Mantel and EP, “‘Mind what gap?’: An Interview with Hilary Mantel”, 3 September 2012, Burleigh Salterton, UK

EP: So the questions intrigued you.

HM: Yes, they did. I can’t answer all of them. I suppose they’re not really susceptible of answers, but they did, you know, spark off thoughts, the more every time I think about them. I can’t remember what you asked first. Oh, yes... the new readers and categorisation. I think there are two different levels of answer to this question, and one’s the one that has meaning to journalists really, what I’ve been saying about the difficulty for my publisher of working out what kind of author I am, and hence the difficulty in marketing me. There’s a perception that my books completely change one to the other, you’ll know that’s not true and I know it’s not true, but people only look superficially at genre and setting and timeframe. And they say, ‘Oh we don’t know if she’s a historical novelist or a contemporary novelist, and *we don’t know her views*, we don’t know where she’s coming from, so she’s got no trademark’. And I think that makes it difficult as a publishing proposition. But there’s a more interesting answer, which I think is to do with the fact that, my books do require of the reader quite a large toleration of ambivalence.

EP: Yes, and ambiguity.

HM: Yes, and not being told the end of stories and of the ellipsis. And the problem tends to come when you gain a rush of new readers, as I have. And many of my new readers bring with them, I suspect, the same expectations that they bring to historical genre fiction, and they’re not going to be satisfied. Therefore I have this great body of new readers – what I don’t know is, if they’re all mutinous and muttering, and whether a great proportion of them have thrown down the book in disgust, I mean they make themselves pretty vocal online. And, as you will know, the reception varies from the highly intelligent to the completely puzzled. The only thing a writer can do is write what they’d, what she’d like to read herself. So you pitch it at a certain level and of course the difficulty with that is that by the time you’re a writer you’re also a professional reader. It’s the great part of what you do, so you’re an expert at reading if you like, and you are only interested in books that you find challenging in some way. Whereas this is not the expectation of the average reader, their expectation is entertainment. And I’ve never wanted to be one of these people who just writes for literary critics. I’ve tried to deliver the satisfactions of story, but at the same time build something self-referential into each book. I mean I think if you look at *Eight Months on Ghazal Street* it’s probably a good instance because that is all about areas of mystery and areas of darkness, which are never penetrated. All the time that book is telling you, life is not like detective fiction. But of course the women around Frances are walking around veiled, and in one instance the body that she thinks... that purports to be underneath is not... female.

EP: No, it’s a very haunting moment actually.

HM: It’s quite scary isn’t it? I had a strange experience with regard to that passage because I read from the book in Germany, and you know when people are working in their second language and they’re fluent, but they have to listen very carefully, you tend to get a very attentive, still audience. I was on a stage, and the hall was wide rather than long, so you saw the whole sweep of these people, and I had the extraordinary experience of seeing an audience all move together to the edge of their seats. Just at that moment, when she comes

into contact with the veiled figure, and, of course, one thinks that’s a figure of speech, but I suppose it does illustrate how it plays with the thriller genre, and even the horror genre too.

EP: Yes, and I think, your short story ‘Comma’ is like that as well... the child, or the baby in the chair, lets out this cry that’s not quite human. It is quite horrifying actually – one of the ways that I’ve been thinking about it is in terms of a *neuralgia*, which is how one of the critics I’ve been reading describes these points in fiction where it sort of vibrates, you can’t quite put your finger on it, and it is horrifying, yet mysterious.

HM: Yes, and of course, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, it was only long after I’d written it that I became conscious of how it fitted into the gothic form... One of the few conditions under which one could actually write a modern gothic is the rare circumstance of living somewhere like Saudi Arabia, because those conditions are your life, the... immurement, the... trying to construe the intentions of other women about you, who may or may not be your friend. The total dependence on a male figure, who... you know, as Frances suspects, may be in a sort of covert conspiracy with all other male figures. And the fact that the woman has to wonder if she’s going mad. Of course when I was writing it, I was just writing what was, it was only *later* that I saw how it fitted into, an eighteenth-century form, but it was the modern version. And, as you see in that book, there’s the fourth flat, in *Vacant Possession*, there’s the... well, I think in *Mother’s Day* there’s the room one doesn’t go in to.

EP: I suppose those earlier books are like the reverse of *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* in a way, a shifting into a totally different culture, and the effects on Frances in terms of hysteria and the effects on Mr Kowalski in *Vacant Possession* in terms of extreme paranoia.

HM: Yes, yes, I mean those refugees lived more in the imaginary homeland that they had lost, which was no longer a physical place but a place they carried in their heads. And slippages and misconstructions in language... England, English being so plural in meaning that it’s very hard to be at home in the language, I think, or very sure...

EP: Yes, there isn’t stability is there, in language. It’s interesting about English, because I think there’s something about northern humour – and we both grew up in the same northern village – and language, which is one of my questions, the humour in your writing... It is terrifically funny in places, you know, to me particularly because I have that same idea of a northern humour, which plays with language. I suppose if you don’t have a particular fluency in English, those meanings are lost, because it’s all about pushing the meaning further along with that kind of humour. But I also think that the laughter makes you reflect on the material in a different way, because there are certainly moments in both *Fludd* and in *Giving Up the Ghost* where you laugh, and then almost the minute you’ve laughed, even if it’s internally, you think – ‘I shouldn’t have laughed at that, that wasn’t funny’. It makes you return to the text feeling slightly different... and it is what you said earlier about your writing being challenging, and some readers feel more or less comfortable with that, and the humour in a way is kind of deceptive because it’s not straightforward. It’s not that you read through it and have a jolly good laugh and you put the book down and you feel great, it’s part of that thinking process in a way I suppose.

HM: Yes, I mean it’s interesting the way it comes about because of course if someone said to me – ‘Be funny!’ – write us a funny story or a funny script, I couldn’t do it. But I often find that what it is, is that you put something on the screen and then you do the equivalent of a double take and it’s only then that you realise it’s funny... so it has a previous existence... it

has a moment where you haven’t perceived it’s nature. And then it’s as if, it holds up a mirror and there you are... and I sometimes actually cover my mouth, so transgressive does it feel at times, but it’s a look what I said, without meaning to. But again, more generally, I think, if you look at a book like *An Experiment in Love*, which is semi-autobiographical, and it does use a lot of my own experiences, although the character’s life isn’t... the character’s biography isn’t mine – I think I could well have written that book when I was twenty-two, but it would have seemed tragic then, whereas later it seemed absurd.

EP: Yes, Karina, one of the young women, she has this whole ‘pull yourself together’ northern-ness, at the same time as coming from a very displaced family.

HM: That book started off as a short story and it was about Carmel and Julianne, and it kept falling over. And it just happened that one day on a journey I was thinking about, shall we call her ‘X’, the Karina-character, and thinking why *was* she like that? And... then realising that she was what the book needed, it needed a triangle. And I realised... again it comes back to language and comprehension in a way because I went to school with many children who didn’t speak English at home. Now of course that’s a common thing nowadays, but less common then, and they were punished for it as if it was vast transgression, and treated as dunces... But also they were negotiating something else, a very different atmosphere because they were haunted by their parents’ pasts – they couldn’t even put a name to those ghosts. And I think as well... you know the Karina character is adamant – ‘I don’t want to know, I don’t want to go to classes on a Saturday morning to speak my language, *I’m English*’. And she would say that with such vehemence that of course you knew she was not, because real English people just take it for granted they don’t go on about it.

EP: Yes absolutely, and there is no challenge, there’s no anger, and there is with Karina. I am just trying to remember, when she goes to the school exam they have to write an essay on their... who is it? Their inspiration?

HM: The person they would most like to meet.

EP: Yes, and she writes about *the Pope*!

HM: [*Simultaneously with EP*]... and she writes about the Pope. Well I can tell you, that *is* true! And I remember *exactly* where we were in Hadfield when we had that discussion – ‘What did you put?’ – and when she said the Pope, I thought ‘Oh God, why didn’t I think of that!’ It’s like putting down your ace isn’t it?

EP: It really is! But thinking about that idea of children wondering what’s happened to their parents in the past, I’ve also been writing recently about *A Change of Climate*, and that’s something that’s quite explicit in that book, this... uncertainty that the children have about whether their parents were tortured... because there’s this sense as they grow older that something is wrong, or something is missing. I found a great quote from you where you said it was *really* difficult to write – ‘I was writing around the point’... I suppose I wonder if you still feel like that about it?

HM: I think... various things about that book, I had a certain problem with Ralph... in that, you know how in *Fludd*, nobody can ever remember what Fludd looks like, as soon as he’s gone they can’t imagine him, and I had a similar problem keeping Ralph’s physical appearance fixed in my mind. I had trouble with him as a character, throughout... and I

talked about the book with a psychotherapist friend before an audience made up of a professional body, and I said that my problem was that I was not convinced that Ralph was a man. And a man in the audience said, and he prefaced it with an apology saying he was not a hard-line Freudian and he didn’t want to be reductive, but that in the early part of the book where Ralph makes a sacrifice of himself for his sister Emma’s career, he had ‘handed her his phallus’, was the way the man put it. And I thought that is *absolutely* right. But there was another funny thing about that book, which is pushing things right to the wire in terms of not knowing what is going to happen, in that when Ralph’s on the threshold with his suitcases in the last chapter... I was going frantic because I was thinking, ‘He’s packing, he’s packing! He’s fastening the suitcase, he’s... out of the door practically’. And Anna of course wants to say, ‘Don’t go’, but she’s not going to say it. What’s going to stop him! What’s going *to stop him going!* And I really didn’t know ’til he got to the threshold. Therefore, I felt perhaps the figure of Melanie... again I wasn’t sure what she represented in the book or whether she was sufficiently represented in it... *[Surprised]* Oh God it means black doesn’t it! The name.

EP: Melanie?

HM: Yes. Well, it must be from that root, mustn’t it, of whence... we’ll look it up. It never occurred to me before. Let’s see if it does... You know, melancholy, melanoma...

EP: Oh right, I’d never thought of that. Because... she is *returning*, and I... it’s funny actually because I found that part similar I suppose as a reader, because you can’t believe he’s going to leave. And then I had this horrifying shock, and it doesn’t even make any sense, and it must have only been for a split second, that this figure that is crawling and running towards them...

HM: Was the baby.

EP: *Was the baby!* Yes!

HM: I think it is. Well, she’s got this head like the sun, and she’s not quite a human thing as she comes crawling towards them... it’s their going out to her that makes her human, she’s being taken into the house. And I’m just wondering what’s left unsaid here, because you asked me this interesting question about motifs... reflections, slammed doors, footsteps... and I wanted to show you the view through this *[stands up and indicates mirror over letter writing desk with view of bay]*. When you sit at this desk, and you look through the mirror, and, you know, I fix that...

EP: That’s amazing!

HM: And this mirror here, when I was in a boat out at sea, you can see that mirror!

EP: Did you see it flashing?

HM: Yes! And that just gave me enormous pleasure, somehow... as a... well I suppose the whole thing of mirrors gives me a kind of intellectual *frisson*, you know. The last book of the Cromwell books is called *The Mirror and the Light*, and the idea is that, *The Mirror and the Light* somehow reflects... has to catch in that mirror everything that went before. Well, again it’s stark autobiography, but in my grandmother’s house she had a sideboard and it had a *huge* mirror, so considering that the sitting room was the sort of cockpit of the house,

everything happened in there, not just in our own family, but all the people who poured through the door, relatives and neighbours, *everything* was reflected in that mirror. The other thing my grandmother had was an oval mirror, with a scene painted on it of a lady in a garden. And I was fascinated by the idea of a story taking place *on the mirror*... and trying to make up what had happened before she came to the garden. Also grandma used to say ‘If you make faces in the mirror, the devil will rise up behind it’, which made me think, ‘How far can I push it?’ Then you see we moved from this house of mirrors to Brosscroft, to the haunted house, and that was full of the... ‘lightly drawn *traces*’ as you describe it. I think the whole penetration of my work by ghosts really started in that house, and that brings me to the question you asked about whether I believe in ghosts, and the answer is, ‘For practical purposes, yes’. It came about because, before I wrote *Beyond Black*... a little lass of about fifteen asked me if I believed in ghosts... and it came out of the blue in a conversation we were both finding hard to sustain. But I thought, if I say no I close down this conversation... and if I say yes, it opens the whole world of possibility. Therefore, *Beyond Black* came about and again it’s the connections between what seem like wildly dissimilar books, in that... in a way the whole of *Beyond Black* is nothing but a vast preparatory exercise for writing the Tudor novels.

EP: The ghosts in *Beyond Black* are an example where ghosts are characters. But I think they work well in terms of language too, and in *Giving Up the Ghost* there’s that fantastic paragraph where you say I can’t ‘locate’ myself in a body, but I will try to locate myself in between the gaps of the letters and the words, ‘between the lines where the ghosts of meaning are’.

HM: I think that’s true, and of course the thing about the ghosts in *Beyond Black* is they’re like the obverse of Fludd who is physical but keeps disappearing, these are ghosts but they keep... the frightening thing is when they threaten to manifest, and you think that Morris might actually be standing there in the room.

EP: Yes, I wanted to ask, I haven’t put this on the sheet of questions actually, but one of my colleagues won’t forgive me if I don’t ask you about the sock in the dryer at the end of *Beyond Black*. Does that have any particular meaning for you?

HM: Yes, it’s Morris’s. It’s... so evidently, in its horribleness a sock that belongs to one of those men. I think really the fact that it’s got into Colette’s washing machine shows her Morris has just reattached himself. But the fiends distil between them all that is most coarse and threatening about masculinity, and of course she’s asking for it isn’t she, by going back to Gavin! I mean there’s an intense fear of the masculine in that book. It’s... men as a collective force and I suppose it was when I’d written *Beyond Black* that I realised that all through my work there are men in the collective. Of course I realised as well that a lot of this goes back to Shakespeare and it’s Nym and Bardolph and ancient Pistol... they are *marauding* through my work in all sorts of guises.

EP: Yes, that makes me think of the... Jacobean bodiliness of the fiends... like in *The Alchemist*, everybody’s always farting, and the body’s very much a part of the text, the male body.

HM: I’m glad you said that because I once said to an interviewer that I was totally Jacobean and not at all Jamesian... and she looked at me as if I’d said something completely *mad*! You know with the Jacobean dramas, there is nowhere where they stop. *Nothing* is too horrible

and I think *Beyond Black* is that kind of book. Yes, and a lot is done in the form of ellipsis even though the ellipsis may not be present on the page, it’s still... *it goes on in the reader’s mind*.

EP: Yes, well I am looking at the way you’ve been read, both in terms of academic readings, and journalism. I mean... there are broad readings, but for me all of them try to *stop* your work, they nail it down. So, the ellipsis – the dot, dot, dot – is a theoretical tool and a means to explode that, because for me it has always signified the burst full stop.

HM: Well, you know, that’s the whole paradox about writing, that what you put in is not necessarily what the reader takes out, etc. You’re putting in far more than you consciously know... yet however decisively we kill the author off, you can’t take all the ghostly traces out of the text. As soon as you’ve swept one away, it’s leaving another trace. It’s strange to think that you embed all these ideas in the text without consciously having them, and you have to acknowledge it works independently from you. You’re not its controller, you’re not its *mother*, and the way in which you are its origin seems quite uninteresting really.

EP: And it just creates more dialogue for readers, with yourself and with each other, in terms of what’s going on in the text, which can only be positive.

HM: Yes, and the more that pours into it, the more the merrier with interpretation really... and sometimes it is very merry indeed! This is the thing about historical fiction, people bring their prejudices and their predilections with them and then they almost literally *cannot* read what you’ve put on the page... people have this thing about Cromwell not being a religious man, and him just using religion for political ends – but right in the first chapter, in the first pages it says, ‘He goes to bed, and he prays, he prays to God!’ And they cannot read that and then you realise what you’re up against, and you wish there could be flashing lights on the page! Which raises distinct possibilities for the eBook! Yes, mark this well!

(4337 words)